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ABSTRACT

A study investigated the effectiveness of a Salem-Teikyo University (West Virginia) program of English-as-a-Second-Language conversational tutoring for a cohort of 185 Japanese students and a similar but smaller Japanese-as-a-Second-Language tutoring program for the English-speaking cohort. Data were gathered through surveys of faculty (n=4), program participants (n=50), and tutors (n=4) of both groups, and of the ESL director and tutor coordinator. Results indicate that all respondents found the program successful in developing student use of the target languages, establishing bonds between Japanese and American students, and helping Japanese students adjust to campus life. (MSE)

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An Examination of Salem-Teikyo University's Conversational Tutoring Program: Perceptions of a Cross-Lingual Tutoring Program

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Abstract

A conversational tutoring program was established to help Japanese students learn English and to help American students learn Japanese. Strengths and weaknesses of the program as perceived by teachers, tutees, tutors,and administrators are reported.

In 1990, Salem-Teikyo University, a university which resulted from the 1989 merger of Salem College of West Virginia and Teikyo University of Tokyo, Japan, admitted 185 Japanese students. These students, along with approximately 200 Americans, formed the student body of Salem-Teikyo during its original year of operation, 1990-91. Japanese students matriculated in the ESL program until their English skills were adequate for matriculation in the regular university curriculum.

Background

Salem, West Virginia, the home of Salem-Teikyo University, is a small, rural town. During the first year that Japanese students were on Salem-Teikyo's campus, these students found little opportunity to speak English in the tiny community in which the university is located. They also found little opportunity to speak English on campus as there were only a few more Americans than Japanese among the student body. Therefore, at the end of the 1990-91 academic year the ESL faculty and the Student Affairs staff committed themselves to finding ways to offer the Japanese students more opportunities to utilize the English skills which they were learning in ESL classes.

One opportunity which had been offered to all Japanese students was the option to spend one to two weeks during the summer of 1990 living in an American family's home. It was also decided that during the 1991-92 academic year a conversational tutoring program, utilizing American speakers to engage all ESL students in at least one hour per week of English conversation would be established.

At first the ESL program attempted to set up the conversational tutoring program on its own, soliciting volunteers from among the Americans in the student body. There was little success in recruiting such volunteers, so the tutor coordinator of the Student Affairs staff helped to organize a conversational tutoring program. The tutor coordinator had funds,provided by Student Administration, to hire tutors to offer conversational practice to the Japanese students, and, thus, a conversational tutoring program, managed by the Student Affairs coordinator, with input and advice from the ESL faculty, was formed.

After the English conversational tutoring program had been in effect one year, the Japanese Studies faculty decided to set up a Japanese conversational tutoring program, parallel to the English conversational tutoring program. This program was also organized by the Student Affairs tutor coordinator who found Japanese students to serve as conversational partners, speaking Japanese with American students and with students of other nationalities who were learning Japanese as a foreign language.

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For the English program the tutor coordinator recruited Ameerican students to serve as conversational tutors: these tutors were trained by the coordinator. All English conversational sessions were held outside of ESL class time. However, an entire ESL class was usually assigned to the same tutor. Each tutor handled about fifteen students. As there were usually 90-100 ESL students enrolled per month, each month six or seven English conversational tutors were employed. (The composition of the ESL classes changed monthly.)

The tutor coordinator maintained records of conversational sessions and submitted payroll information for the tutors. The coordinator notified ESL faculty when students were absent from conversational sessions. In turn, the ESL faculty suggested topics for tutoring sessions and attempted to make sure students attended conversations.

The tutor coordinator had much less responsibility for the Japanese tutoring program than for the English tutoring. This might have been because the Japanese tutoring program was much smaller than the English tutoring program, and, therefore, there were fewer Japanese tutors (usually 2-3 Japanese tutors each month compared to 6-7 English tutors). As the Japanese conversational tutoring program had fewer tutors, the Japanese language faculty might have felt it could take responsibility for management of the Japanese tutoring program. The Japanese language faculty trained the Japanese tutors who were recruited by the tutor coordinator. Unlike the tutors for the English conversational tutoring program, the Japanese tutors tutored in the Japanese language classroom.

Goals of the Tutoring Programs

The English conversational program and the Japanese conversational programs had similar goals:

(1) to help language students to develop acuity for native pronunciation of the target language

(2) to reinforce language structures and vocabulary introduced in the language classroom

(3) to allow language students an opportunity to interact with representatives of the culture of the target language.

(4) to give language students an opportunity to develop an ability to use the target language in an informal conversational setting

Assessment of the Conversational Tutoring Program

After the English conversational tutoring program had been in effect for three academic years and the Japanese conversational program for two, a study was done to understand the strengths and weaknesses of these programs as well as the outcomes of the programs.

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Written surveys were given to members of the two faculty groups (ESL and Japanese), the tutees in both programs, and the tutors for both groups. The ESL director and the tutor coordinator also offered their assessments of the programs.

The faculty members were asked whether they felt the conversational tutoring program had helped students to learn the target languages and to learn about the cultures of those languages. They were asked whether they felt conversational tutoring had been well-managed, whether record-keeping had been adequate and whether they (the teachers) had had enough input into the program.

The students were asked whether they had enjoyed the program, whether they had improved in their ability to use the target language, and whether they had increased their knowledge of the culture of the language which they were studying. They were also asked which topics they had most enjoyed discussing with their tutors.

The tutors were asked whether they had received adequate training for the job, whether they had enjoyed the job, whether they felt record-keeping and evaluation were fair, and whether they had improved in their knowledge of the culture from which their tutees came.

ESL Faculty's Responses

Survey forms were sent to ten ESL faculty members; however, only four teachers responded to the survey.

Overall, these teachers expressed high satisfaction with the conversational tutoring program. Every teacher said that the conversational tutoring program had contributed to the ESL students' knowledge of the American culture. Three of the teachers felt that the conversational program had helped the ESL students improve in their use of English. One teacher did not feel that the program had done this. This teacher complained that the students met tutors for an hour every week, but these meetings did not seem to help the students improve in their use of English.

The ESL faculty felt it had adequate input into the tutoring program, but it did not generally feel record-keeping was adequate. The teachers would like to have had more details about the students' sessions and attendance.

Japanese Faculty's Responses

All three members of the Japanese Studies faculty were asked to complete a survey form. All responded. All Japanese Studies faculty members reported that they felt the Japanese Language students' ability to use Japanese had improved as a result of the tutoring program.

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Faculty members reported that students' listening comprehension and speaking ability had improved as a result of the program. They also reported that students' knowledge of the Japanese culture had grown. One member of the Japanese Studies faculty reported that he was not interested in having students develop cultural knowledge per se, Rather, he wanted students to develop linguistic use from which cultural knowledge would come.

Each member of the Japanese Studies faculty commented that the conversational activity was very beneficial to the students who were doing the tutoring. They felt that the role of conversational tutor helped the Japanese students who are now living in an English-speaking world; it is very beneficial for these students to have an opportunity to teach the members of that world about the Japanese language and culture.

English Conversational Tutors' Responses

Surveys were sent to ten English conversational tutors, but only two responded. Both of these tutors felt that the tutoring program should have a better system of record-keeping. Both also believed that participating in this program as tutors had contributed to their knowledge of the Japanese culture.

Japanese Conversational Tutors' Responses

Although surveys were sent to five Japanese conversational tutors, only two responded. Both said that they had enjoyed tutoring. Both believed that one of the benefits of tutoring was that they had improved their knowledge of English as a result of using English to explain Japanese grammar points to American students. Both of these tutors believed conversational tutoring had helped them to improve their knowledge of the American culture.

ESL Students' Responses

Surveys were sent to ninety ESL students; fifty responded. Of the fifty who responded, twenty-eight reported enjoying the conversational tutoring program. Seventeen reported they did not enjoy it. Five reported they enjoyed it sometimes.

Even though only a little more than half reported enjoying the program, eighty-six percent (forty-three) of the ESL students responding reported that they felt the program had helped them improve their conversational English and eighty-eight percent (forty-four) reported that the program had helped them improve their knowledge of the American culture.

Students were asked to list topics they most enjoyed and least enjoyed discussing with their tutors. The topic most often listed as enjoyable was sports and hobbies (listed by twelve people) followed by personal life (nine people) and American culture compared to

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Japanese culture (eight people). Nine students reported that they enjoyed talking with their tutor about all topics. Ten students reported that they did not like to discuss their personal lives with their tutors; personal life was the least favorite topic for discussion.

Japanese Studies Students' Responses

Although survey forms were sent to twenty Japanese language students, none responded to the survey.

Tutor Coordinator's Assessment

The tutor coordinator reported being satisfied with the conversational tutoring program. He said that one of the greatest strengths of the program was that it had made it possible for Japanese students and American students to get to know each other well. However, he had noticed that when the Japanese and American students became good friends, this often led to American students withdrawing from the program as conversational tutors. He surmised this was because some of the Japanese students became very unhappy when they realized Americans were being paid to talk to them. To preserve the friendship, some Americans were willing to give up the paid positions.

The tutor coordinator felt that one of the weaknesses of the program was the record-keeping system. He planned to further develop the record-keeping and tighten it up for the next academic year.

His observation about the tutoring sessions was that some students had become bi-lingual to the point that they could switch back and forth between Japanese and English. Thus, he often observed Japanese and American students having conversations in which they spoke politely in Japanese, but when they got into a disagreement, they immediately switched to English.

ESL Director's Assessment

The ESL director reported that the conversational tutoring program improved the ESL students' ability to use English, But, moreover, contact among students made it possible for both Japanese and American students to develop an understanding of each other's cultures. Real friendships developed between tutors and tutees. According to the ESL director, for some Japanese students these relationships made it possible for them to feel comfortable and happy on campus.

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Summary

While the conversational tutoring program needed to improve its record-keeping practices, teachers,tutees, tutors, and administrators all agreed that the program had been successful in helping students develop their use of the target languages and in their knowledge of the culture of the target languages. Moreover, the conversational tutoring program helped to establish bonds between Japanese and American students. It also contributed to helping Japanese students feel relaxed and comfortable on the campus.

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Summary of ESL Students' Responses to Questionnaire:

1) Have you enjoyed participating in the conversational tutoring program?

Yes	No	Sometimes
28	17	5

2) Which topics did you most enjoy discussing with your tutors?

Cars	Love	Holidays	American cities, landmarks, and trips
2	4	1	3

American Culture	Everything	Hobbies and sports
8	2	12

Personal life	Nothing	Campus	Movies
9	3	1	1

Rumors and Gossip
1

3) Which topics did you least enjoy discussing with your tutors?

Cars	Reasons for coming to the USA	Love
1	2	2

Nothing	Body	Personal life	Business
13	2	9	1

Rumors	Religion	Customs	School
1	1	1	2

4) Do you feel the conversational tutoring program has helped you become a better speaker of English?

Yes	No	Don't know
47	5	2

5) Do you feel the conversational tutoring program has helped you to understand the American culture?

Yes	No	Don't know
44	4	2